

"Richly biblical and encouraging, Scott LaPierre's latest book reveals a gracious pastor's heart, compassionately equipping people for trials. Every believer needs this book!"

Douglas Bond—Speaker, tour leader, and author of twenty-five Christian books

ENDURING TRIALS GOD'S WAY



*A Biblical Recipe for
Finding Joy in Suffering*

Scott LaPierre

*"One of the best biblical treatments of suffering I have seen.
You want this book in your library!"*

Carlton C. McLeod, D. Min—Speaker, author, and senior pastor

Trials are part of life on this side of heaven, and God wants to use them for your good! Pastor Scott LaPierre presents scriptural principles that give believers the encouragement they need when suffering. Every chapter concludes with questions that help you apply what you are reading. With *Enduring Trials God's Way* you will:

- Develop the spiritual perspective to embrace trials
- Appreciate the maturity trials produce
- Understand the rewards—in this life and the next—for enduring trials
- Recognize God is still compassionate and gracious even during trials
- Learn to persevere through trials that threaten your faith

Your suffering is not meaningless or accidental. God loves you, and He always works in your best interests. Learn the *Biblical Recipe for Finding Joy in Suffering!*

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Praise for *Enduring Trials God's Way*

“Suffering. You're either in it, or you will be! Richly biblical, Scott LaPierre's latest book reveals a gracious pastor's heart, compassionately equipping people for trials. Every believer needs this book.”

Douglas Bond—Speaker, tour leader, and author of twenty-five books of biography, practical theology, and historical fiction

“Everywhere we look there are extreme circumstances: hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, diseases, economic challenges, political turmoil, and the list goes on. I truly believe Scott has written a book ‘for such a time as this.’ This is one of the best biblical treatments on the difficult subject of suffering that I have come across. Packed with encouragement from the Holy Scriptures, Pastor Scott carefully lifts up the wonderful sovereignty of God in suffering and the cross of Christ during trials to help the reader develop the blessing of an eternal perspective. Every believer needs this volume in their library. I wholeheartedly recommend *Enduring Trials God's Way!*”

Carlton C. McLeod, D. Min—Speaker, author, and senior pastor of Calvary Revival Church Chesapeake

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Introduction

My wife, Katie, and I grew up together in northern California. We lost touch after high school and then reconnected almost ten years later. At the time, Katie was living in our hometown of McArthur, California, but I was seven hours south in Lemoore, California. Some wonderful friends of mine, Pat and Kathy Mundy, graciously invited Katie to live with them so we could be near each other, even though they did not know her yet. The four of us became close. They performed our pre-marital counseling and made the trip north for our wedding. Seven years ago, Katie and I moved from Lemoore to Woodland, Washington. Although the distance changed our relationship with Pat and Kathy, we remained friends.

A few years ago, Pat retired from the police department, and he and Kathy looked forward to investing in their grandkids, traveling, and serving in the church. Then everything changed. Kathy got sick, and a hospital visit revealed an aggressive form of cancer. The “golden years” have been filled with doctor appointments and multiple rounds of chemotherapy. Nothing slowed the disease, and in a last attempt, they moved to Seattle for an experimental treatment. A few weeks ago, on their way north, they surprised us and stopped by our house to visit.

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I felt privileged to see them at this time in their lives. As soon as we got them sitting in our living room, I wanted to hear everything they felt comfortable sharing about their trial, but the first thing they said was, “How is your dad’s Alzheimer’s?” Despite what they were experiencing, they “[esteemed] others better than [themselves]” (Philippians 2:3). Throughout the conversation, they gave little indication they were experiencing such a difficult test. As we talked, they discussed their blessings far more than they discussed any amount of suffering. Repeatedly, they shared how good God was being to them.

Reflecting on that conversation, I have asked myself: “Why did they not question (or criticize) God? How could they be so thankful during such a difficult trial? Why did they respond this way when their circumstances would devastate many other people? Could I respond this way if I experienced something similar?” Only time can provide an answer to the last question. The other questions I hope to answer in the following chapters.

Is there any reason you should trust my answers? No, and I am not asking you to do so. This book is not a collection of my thoughts about trials. Rather, I am inviting you to trust the Bible. *Enduring Trials God's Way* came from several sermons I preached, and I labored over each one for twenty to thirty hours per week. God knows what is necessary for people to find joy in suffering, and I hope to present the recipe for that in the following chapters.

As a pastor, I watch firsthand as people suffer through trials. Woodland Christian Church maintains a prayer list, and it seems as soon as we can remove one request, another is added. We have

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prayed about medical issues, job losses, deaths of family members, and the examples could go on.

My family has not been immune to trials. This past year: my sister-in-law, who lives with her family next door to us, experienced two massive heart attacks; my dad, who lives with my mom up the street from us, went through radiation and chemotherapy (and that is besides his Alzheimer's); and Katie and I experienced our second miscarriage.

Trials are inevitable on this side of heaven as we will see as we begin chapter 1. My prayer has been that I can give you the encouragement from God's Word that He wants you to have when you experience them!

Chapter One

Expect Trials

*Beloved, do not think it strange concerning
the fiery trial which is to try you,
as though some strange thing happened to you.*

—1 Peter 4:12

As we just discussed, trials are common even among Christians. Peter tells us “not [to] think [them] strange.” The New Testament was primarily written in Greek, and the word for “strange” is *xenizō*. It means, “Surprised, astonished, or shocked.”¹ We should not be surprised, astonished, or shocked by trials; instead, we should expect them. James 1:2 says, “*when* you fall into various trials...” versus “*if* you...” We will face trials, and this is a New Testament theme:

- Acts 14:22a—“Strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, [Paul said] ‘*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*’”

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- 1 Thessalonians 3:3—“No one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that *we are appointed to this.*”

Even though trials are part of the Christian life, we often question how they could happen to us. We might say, “Why would God let this take place?” We act surprised, astonished, or shocked, but based on Scripture we should say, “Since I know trials are part of the Christian life, how would God have me respond? How can I handle this in a way that glorifies Him?”

We should go through this life with the understanding that all Christians experience trials. People expecting the Christian life to be carefree are in for a shock. This is why it is terrible to tell people, “If you become a Christian, Jesus will make your life wonderful!” When they experience trials, there are only three possibilities:

1. They will be upset with you later, feeling as though you lied to them.
2. They will be angry with Jesus for not making their life perfect like you said He would.
3. They will think Christianity is untrue, telling themselves, “If Jesus were real, He would not have let this happen to me.”

Instead, we need to be honest about trials, encouraging others and ourselves to embrace what Jesus said to His disciples: “In the world *you will have tribulation*” (John 16:33b).

Trials Are Unpredictable, but Not Accidents

Even though we should expect trials, we do not know when they will take place, which makes them unpredictable. James 1:2 says, “My brethren, count it all joy when you *fall into* various trials.” The words “fall into” communicate the unexpected nature of trials. The Greek word for “fall into,” or other translations say, “face,” “meet,” or “encounter,” is *periptō*.² It only occurs three times in Scripture and each time it describes something that is unpredictable. The other two occurrences are:

- Luke 10:30—“Jesus answered and said, ‘A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among (*periptō*) thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.’”
- Acts 27:41a—“Striking (*periptō*) a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground.”

It was unexpected when thieves robbed the man and when the boat crashed. Unpredictable is a great way to describe trials, but do not misunderstand the words “fall into” and think trials are accidents. It is not as though we are walking along, trip, and find ourselves in a trial.

If we see trials this way, then when we experience one we will say, “I am so unlucky. Why do bad things keep happening to me?” Even worse is when people feel as though they could have prevented whatever took place. They are filled with guilt and regret

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saying, “If I had only _____, then this would not have happened.” They beat themselves up, sometimes never forgiving themselves.

Instead of viewing trials as accidents, we need to recognize they are from the Lord. Before trials reach us, they first pass through the throne of God. Some people are troubled by this view, but what is the alternative? God is not sovereign. He is not directing our lives. He is not in control of what happens to us. He is looking down saying, “Why did this happen to _____? I wish there were something I could do. If only _____ would have happened instead.” This is a troubling view!

If you could only choose one area of life you want God in control of, wouldn't it be the trials you experience? When people are suffering, one of the best ways for them to encourage themselves and experience any comfort is in recognizing: “God is in control. I can trust Him. He loves me. I am His child. He wants what is best for me, and He is using this for my benefit.”

One of the most quoted verses when people are suffering is Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” This verse is about God's sovereignty. It encourages us because we are reminded the trial we are experiencing is not an accident.

The Need to Be Prepared

Since we should expect trials, we must prepare for them. Asa, king of Judah, provides a perfect illustration. Unfortunately, sometimes people read the Old Testament and think, “What does this have

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to do with me? How can I learn from people whose lives are so different from mine?" These are unfortunate questions to ask because the New Testament states the Old Testament provides us with examples:

- Romans 15:4a—"For whatever things were written [in the Old Testament] were written *for our learning*."
- 1 Corinthians 10:11a—"Now all these things happened to [the Israelites] *as examples*, and they were written *for our admonition*."

Church Age believers can learn from Old Testament accounts. Often, they provide a backdrop for New Testament instruction. Asa was one good king in the Old Testament, and he reveals how (and when) to prepare for trials. Early in Asa's reign, God gave him peace. What did he do during this restful time? He built! Part of 2 Chronicles 14:5–7 records:

The kingdom was quiet under [Asa]. And he built fortified cities in Judah, for the land had rest; he had no war in those years, because the LORD had given him rest. Therefore he said to Judah, "Let us build these cities and make walls around them, and towers, gates, and bars, while the land is yet before us, because we have sought the LORD our God; we have sought Him, and He has given us rest on every side." So they built and prospered.

Like Asa, we should build during peaceful times. While Asa strengthened his nation physically, we should strengthen ourselves spiritually. Pray and read the Word regularly. Serve the body of Christ. We do not serve others so they will serve us. We serve

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others because we want to serve Christ, but one blessing often produced is brothers and sisters who will “weep with [us when we] weep” and “suffer with [us]” when we suffer (Romans 12:15b, 1 Corinthians 12:26a). I have seen people enter trials and become frustrated that nobody was there for them, but in most of those cases they were not there for others who were “weeping” and “suffering.”

Unfortunately, during peaceful times, we are often tempted to do the opposite of build, and that is to relax. Then we are unprepared when trials come. Let me illustrate the danger of this with a sports analogy. I attended a small high school. Our football team had less than twenty players. While I have no doubt I would not have played much at a more competitive school, at my school I was the running back, punt returner, and kickoff returner. As a result, I was often tackled, and it taught me there are two ways to be hit. The most common and desirable way is when it is expected. You know you will be tackled, so you prepare for the hit. The other tackle type takes place when you are blindsided. Since you did not expect to be hit, you are unprepared, and it can be devastating. The point? Sadly, many people are like football players running down the field, unprepared for the trial about to blindside them.

As a pastor, I have seen people become serious about their relationships with the Lord once they are in a trial. Then they begin praying, reading the Bible, and attending church consistently. God uses trials to bring people to Himself, so this is better than not engaging in these spiritual activities; however, this is far from the ideal approach. What if Asa built his nation after an enemy attacked him?

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Should a student begin studying the day of a test? Should a couple plan for retirement when they retire? Should parents start disciplining their children when they become teenagers?

Athletes and soldiers spend years preparing for competitions and combat. Should Christians compare themselves with athletes and soldiers? Paul thought so! He said a Christian “must endure hardship as a *good soldier of Jesus Christ*...that he may please Him who *enlisted him as a soldier*” (2 Timothy 2:3–4), and he called Epaphroditus and Archippus “fellow soldiers” (Philippians 2:25, Philemon 1:2). We are commanded to wear armor and carry a sword (Ephesians 6:11–17). Paul compared the Christian life to a race (1 Corinthians 9:24–25, 2 Timothy 4:7, Hebrews 12:1). Like athletes and soldiers must prepare physically, so must Christians prepare spiritually. When believers are spiritually lazy, they should expect to struggle with trials as much as physically lazy athletes and soldiers would struggle during combat and athletic competitions.

Moving back to Asa, he strengthened his nation during times of peace, and this left him prepared when the time came. Second Chronicles 14:8–10 continues:

And Asa had an army of three hundred thousand from Judah who carried shields and spears, and from Benjamin two hundred and eighty thousand men who carried shields and drew bows; all these were mighty men of valor.

Then Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and three hundred chariots, and he came to Mareshah. So Asa went out against him, and they set the troops in battle array in the Valley of Zephathah at Mareshah.

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We all face trials, and Asa was no exception. One of the most formidable armies recorded in Scripture came against him. His five hundred eighty thousand soldiers sound impressive until you read that the Ethiopians numbered one million. No, we do not face armies that greatly outnumber us, but we do face trials that make us feel as desperate as Asa felt. He was completely distressed, and to his credit, he responded wonderfully. Second Chronicles 14:11–12 records:

And Asa cried out to the LORD his God, and said,
“LORD, it is nothing for You to help, whether with many
or with those who have no power; help us, O LORD our
God, for we rest on You, and in Your name we go against
this multitude. O LORD, You are our God; do not let man
prevail against You!” So the LORD struck the Ethiopians
before Asa and Judah, and the Ethiopians fled.

This is what it looks like to turn to the Lord during a difficult trial. Asa praised God's strength and poured out his heart to Him. Write this prayer down. Circle it, highlight it, or underline it in your Bible. Asa's trial was the Ethiopian army, but our trial might be a job loss, cancer diagnosis, unfaithful spouse, or rebellious child. When the trial comes, follow Asa's example and cry out to GOD for help.

The Greater Victory God Provides

God honored Asa's dependence on Him by fighting on his behalf and striking down the Ethiopians. At this point, I wish I could write: “If you depend on the Lord, He will strike down whatever

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trial you face. He will give you a better job. He will heal the cancer. He will bring your unfaithful spouse or rebellious child to repentance.” The problem is, this would not be true. God might not do any of those things regardless of your spiritual maturity or faith.

In a discussion of the godliest Christians, the Apostle Paul would have to be considered, if not placed at the top of the list. He suffered from “a thorn” that affected him so much he “pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from [him]” (2 Corinthians 12:8). In 2 Corinthians 11:23–29, Paul listed his sufferings for Christ, and they included imprisonments, whippings, near-death experiences, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and nakedness. This man was acquainted with trials, so for him to pray three times that God would remove something reveals how terrible it must have been. Despite Paul’s godliness, instead of removing the thorn, God told him, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9a). God gave him the grace he needed to endure the difficult trial.

We do not know what the thorn was—whether it was physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual—which allows us to apply it to any suffering we experience. We pray for God to remove trials like Paul prayed for God to remove the thorn. If God does not remove the trial like He did not remove Paul’s thorn, then we must also trust God’s grace will be sufficient to endure the trial like it was sufficient for Paul to endure the thorn. The most extreme consequence of a trial is death. What happens if “the thorn” takes our lives—how does that reveal God’s sufficiency? In 1 Corinthians 15:26, Paul calls death our “enemy” and then in 1 Corinthians 15:54–57, he writes:

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So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

"O Death, where is your sting?

O Hades, where is your victory?"

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Death is capitalized to personify it as an enemy that Jesus defeated. Asa faced the Ethiopians, and Death is an enemy we face. To illustrate the finality of Christ's victory over Death, Revelation 20:14 says, "Death [is] cast into the lake of fire." If a trial takes our lives, then God's grace is sufficient through Christ's victory over Death. Just as God fought for Asa and gave him the victory over the enemy he faced, so too has He fought for us and given us the victory over the enemy we face.

Hebrews 11 contains a collection of the great men and women of faith. Toward the end of the chapter two groups are identified. The first group is in verses 33–35a:

Through faith [they] subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.

What a fantastic account of victories! This might be the most condensed list of triumphs in all of Scripture. Immediately after this though, the second group is listed in verses 35b–38:

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Others were tortured...[they] had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

What a heavy account of sufferings! This might be the most condensed list of defeats in all of Scripture. Why the difference between the two groups? Did the second group lack faith? Were they lesser Christians than the first group? Not at all. They were wonderful men and women of God. For reasons not revealed, God allowed completely different outcomes for two equally faith-filled groups of people. From earth's perspective, it looks as though God did not give the second group victories over the trials they faced, but from heaven's perspective "the world was not worthy" of them. They were too good for this world, so God removed them from it. In Philippians 1:21, Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ, and *to die is gain*" and they gained the victory of being ushered into heaven.

The Danger of Daily Trials

James 1:2 says, "*You* fall into *various* trials..." and 1 Peter 1:6 says, "*You* have been grieved by *various* trials..." The words "you" and "various" reveal the personal and unique nature of trials. For Asa, he faced an Ethiopian army that was almost twice the size of his army. For others, their trials were considerably different:

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- Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery.
- Job lost most of his loved ones and experienced terrible physical suffering.
- David was hunted by King Saul for years.
- Ezekiel's wife was killed.
- The Apostle John was exiled on the island of Patmos.

Each of these trials was personal and unique to the individuals, and the trials we experience are personal and unique to us. Although that creates a similarity between us and the people in Scripture, the problem is we are often given the most dramatic events from their lives. Most trials we experience daily are of a much smaller magnitude. Only a handful of times do we experience suffering that could be considered life-changing. The rest of our lives are filled with trials that could be fittingly described by Jesus: “And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and *beat on that house*” (Matthew 7:25a and 27a).

What imagery is created by the words “beat on that house”? These are the trials that take place daily and can even become unrecognizable because of their regularity. These storms beat on us at work, home, school, while raising children, and the list goes on until we—like the house in the parable—feel as though we are going to collapse. Who has not said, “I cannot do this anymore! I do not know if I will make it through one more day.” Many people have honorably endured great trials, but then found themselves too weak to endure the strain of sleepless nights with babies, unpleasant co-workers, obnoxious neighbors, marriage struggles, financial issues, and health problems.

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In November 2015, Czech pilot, Zbynek Abel, was forced to perform an emergency landing of his Aero L-159 Alco subsonic attack jet when it collided with a bird. The aircraft was armed with powerful weapons that could destroy other planes and attack cities, but it was downed by a bird hundreds of times smaller and had no powerful engine, deadly weapons, or skilled pilot.³ In the same way, small trials can threaten to take us down, making them as dangerous as the large trials we fear most. We know people who have endured great trials, whether it is a disease, physical handicap, or the loss of a loved one. We are challenged by their endurance, wondering how we would respond if we were in their place. Although, this creates a danger if we, like the attack jet, only “arm” ourselves for the large trials of life.

What is the solution to these daily trials? Jesus provided the answer: “whoever hears these sayings of Mine, *and does them*, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, *for it was founded on the rock*” (Matthew 7:24–25).

Asa needed to build a strong foundation during times of peace to endure the trial of the Ethiopian army that could have collapsed his nation. Similarly, we need a strong foundation to endure the trials that can lead to the collapse of our lives. That foundation is obedience to Christ. Jesus promised obeying His teaching enables us to survive the storms of life we can all expect.

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4. Discuss three trials you experienced that were unique to you.

A.

B.

C.

5. Describe a victory God gave you from a trial.

6. What daily trials do you experience that you need to be aware of, because of their potential to wear you down?

Chapter Two

Did You Do Something Wrong?

*For it is better, if it is the will of God,
to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.*

—1 Peter 3:17

You should expect trials, but when they take place, you do not have to wonder if you did something wrong! A woman wrote me about a miscarriage she experienced, asking if God was punishing her. It was heartbreaking. The miscarriage was painful enough without also having to wonder if it was her fault. It is tragic when people blame themselves for their trials.

It is also tragic when people experience trials and “friends” try to get them to blame themselves! Job’s friends come to mind. They started off well “[sitting] down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and *no one spoke a word to him*, for

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they saw that his grief was very great” (Job 2:13). This demonstrates what to do when people are suffering. The “Ministry of Presence” requires being a good listener. I received a good piece of advice when I first became a pastor: “If you cannot improve on silence, do not.” Solomon said there is “A time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7b), and “He who has knowledge spares his words” (Proverbs 17:27a).

Unfortunately, Job’s friends did not follow these verses, and things went downhill after they opened their mouths. Eliphaz was the first to speak, and he summarized their argument in Job 4:7 when he asked, “Who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright ever cut off?” In other words, “When have bad things ever happened to good people?” Job’s friends wanted to convince him that since he suffered terribly, he must have sinned terribly.

As much as Job’s friends initially showed what to do when people suffer, they later also showed what not to do—lecture, preach, say things like, “This is happening because...” or worse, “God would not be doing this if you...” At the end of the book, God showed up and “said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for *you have not spoken of Me what is right*’” (Job 42:7). He was referring to their statements that people only suffer when they have done something wrong.

In Jesus’ day, people thought if something bad happened it must have been caused by sin. Two accounts reveal that even the disciples held this false belief, and both times they expressed it Jesus corrected them:

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- Pilate murdered some Galileans and a tower collapsed causing eighteen deaths. The disciples thought the people died because of their sinfulness, but Jesus said, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no...Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no” (Luke 13:2–5).
- When the disciples saw a blind man they asked Jesus: “‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in Him’” (John 9:2–3).

God wants to reveal Himself through trials and use them for our good, but we do not have to wonder if we did something wrong. We learned that a trial does not necessarily indicate wrongdoing, but sometimes we do bring on our own suffering.

Do Not Confuse Trials and Discipline

What happens if we suffer because we did something wrong? That is not a trial. That is discipline. The Apostle Peter identifies two causes of suffering: “For it is better, if it is the will of God, to *suffer for doing good than for doing evil*” (1 Peter 3:17). Suffering is part of God’s perfect and wise plan for His people even when they do good, but Peter wants his readers to avoid suffering caused by their sinfulness.

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As tragic as it is when people experience a trial and wonder if it is their fault, it is equally tragic when people sin, God disciplines them, and they think it is not their fault. Consider these examples from Scripture:

- After Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it as God commanded, God said, “Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore *you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them*” (Numbers 20:12).
- After David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, God told him through the prophet Nathan, “*The sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife*” (2 Samuel 12:10).
- After Jehoshaphat entered an alliance with evil King Ahaziah to build ships, God told him through the prophet Eliezer, ““Because you have allied yourself with Ahaziah, *the Lord has destroyed your works.*” Then the ships were wrecked” (2 Chronicles 20:37).

These men suffered because of their sins. It would be incorrect to say they experienced trials. It would be correct to say God disciplined them. The same is true of the negative consequences of foolish decisions. Imagine the following:

- People lose their jobs, because they slacked off for years
- People's finances are tight, because of years of impulsive purchases

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- People are diagnosed with diabetes, because of years of gluttonous eating
- People are in miserable marriages, because they ignored their parents' warnings about the spouses they married

These are not trials! These are the consequences of exercising poor judgment. These people were “led astray by their own great folly” (Proverbs 5:23b). Sometimes people sin, are disciplined, and then say, “Why am I suffering?” If friends love them enough to be honest, they will answer, “Because of your disobedience.”

Although there are rewards for enduring trials (See chapter 6), it is not the same with discipline. When we “[do] evil” and suffer because of it, God expects us to humbly accept it: “For *what credit is it* if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently?” (1 Peter 2:20a).

Although this might sound discouraging, even though there is no “credit” for receiving discipline there are many benefits! Hebrews 12:11a says, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.” How true are these words! Yes, discipline hurts, but the author of Hebrews also provides reasons believers can be encouraged when disciplined.

When Disciplined: Be Encouraged You Are a Child of God

Hebrews 12:6–8 records:

“...For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

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It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (ESV)

When we sin and God disciplines us, we can be encouraged that He does so because He loves us. We want to be confident in our salvation, and experiencing discipline allows us to say, “God is my Father. I am His child.” When I see other people’s children misbehaving, I do not discipline them because they are not my children. God acts similarly toward unbelievers. Sometimes people sin and it looks like “they are getting away with it.” Either God is giving them time to repent, or they are not His children.

When Disciplined: Be Encouraged You Are in God’s Hands

Prior to pastoring, I taught elementary school for almost ten years. When students disobeyed, I regularly found myself wondering what the appropriate punishment would be—detention, suspension, time out, or call parents? Circumstances make things even more complicated. What is the punishment for a student who lies once, versus a student who demonstrates a pattern of deceitfulness? What about a student who mistreated a student for no reason, versus a student who acts out when provoked?

Once, when my class was walking in a line, a notoriously cruel student repeatedly flicked another student’s ear. This went

on for a while, revealing significant self-control from the student being picked on. Finally, he turned around and kicked the bully as hard as he could. What was an appropriate punishment for the student who kicked the other student? Part of me wanted to congratulate him for standing up to someone who intimidated others.

As a parent, I face the same question when disciplining my children. Ephesians 6:4a says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath.” Sometimes I ask myself, “I addressed this with my children before, if I bring it up again, will I be exasperating them?” While Katie and I pray almost daily for wisdom raising our children, we do not know absolutely that we are doing what is right. Hebrews 12:9–10 describes the situation: “We have had human fathers who...*chastened us as seemed best to them*, but *He for our profit*, that we may be partakers of His holiness.” As parents, we do what “seems best to us,” but when God disciplines us we can be encouraged He is doing what “profits” us. We never have to wonder if He is acting too severely, choosing the wrong punishment, or failing in some other way.

Consider a situation that took place with David after he sinfully numbered the people. God sent the prophet Gad to rebuke him and give him the choice between three different punishments. Second Samuel 24:12–14 records:

[Gad told] David, “Thus says the LORD: ‘I offer you three things; choose one of them for yourself, that I may do it to you.’” So Gad came to David and told him; and he said to him, “Shall seven years of famine come

to you in your land? Or shall you flee three months before your enemies, while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' plague in your land? Now consider and see what answer I should take back to Him who sent me.”

And David said to Gad, “*I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man.*”

When David was disciplined, he wanted to be in God's hands. When we are “in great distress,” we can be encouraged that we are in God's hands. He knows what is best.

When Disciplined: Be Encouraged by the Fruit that Can Be Produced

God disciplines us because He wants us to repent. The first thing that comes to mind when thinking about repentance is stopping a sinful action, but repentance is as much about starting (producing fruit), as it is about stopping. John the Baptist said: “Bear fruits worth of repentance” (Matthew 3:8). Ephesians 4:25–32 provides examples of repenting (stopping, putting off), and producing fruit (starting, putting on):

- Ephesians 4:25a—“Therefore, *putting away lying*, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor.’”
- Ephesians 4:28–29—“Let him who *stole* steal no longer, but rather let him *labor, working with his hands* what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let *no corrupt word* proceed out of your mouth, but

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what is *good for necessary edification*, that it may impart grace to the hearers.”

- Ephesians 4:31–32—“Let all *bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you*, with all malice. And *be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another*, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

As a pastor, people have asked me, “I repented of _____. Why do I keep struggling?” I respond by asking, “What did you start doing instead? What did you produce in place of your sin?” For example:

- You stopped going to bars, but then how did you spend that time?
- You stopped yelling at your kids, but what did you start saying to them?
- You stopped coveting, but what did you start giving?

There is an unfortunate human tendency for reform to be temporary. Psychologists, prisons, and juvenile centers can testify to this. One main reason is people attempt to repent without producing the corresponding fruit. When sin is removed, the vacuum that is created must be filled with fruit. In Matthew 12:43–45a, Jesus told a parable that warns against repentance that leaves a hole:

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, “I will return to my house from which I came.” And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and

dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

The unclean spirit pictures sin, and the man removed it from his life, but he did not produce fruit. He stopped without starting. He put off without putting on. As a result, his life (the house) remained “empty.” Things looked good at first (swept, and put in order), but the spirit (sin) returned and the man’s condition was worse. When true repentance has not taken place, inevitably a person’s situation deteriorates as the sin grows. We can be encouraged by God’s discipline, because it “*yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness* to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11b).

Who Benefits from God’s Discipline?

The title of the previous section reads, “Fruit that Can Be Produced” versus “Fruit that Is Produced.” There is no guarantee God’s discipline will benefit us. The end of Hebrews 12:11 says “those who have been trained by it” and this identifies the people who benefit from the Father’s discipline. “He will never learn” is a fitting way to describe some people:

- Proverbs 17:10—“Rebuke is more effective for a wise man, Than a hundred blows on a fool.”
- Proverbs 26:11—“As a dog returns to his own vomit, So a fool repeats his folly.”
- Proverbs 27:22—“Though you grind a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, Yet his foolishness will not depart from him.”

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Fools suffer because of their actions, but it does not produce lasting change. Part of the reason is they do not see their fault, because fools never think they are wrong: “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes” (Proverbs 12:15).

There is a similar danger associated with confusing trials and discipline. When people make this mistake, they are acting like fools who fail to see their folly. Without recognizing they caused their suffering, they will not be trained by God’s discipline. If they do not think they have done anything wrong, they will not understand God is trying to produce repentance. Spiritual growth will be hindered, and the painful situation will often be repeated.

When this pattern takes place, the only solution is to have the humility and wisdom to say, “This is not a random trial. I have sinned. God is disciplining me and I must repent.” Instead of saying, “How could God let this happen to me?” the proper response is, “I am thankful God loves me enough to get this sin out of my life and help me produce the corresponding fruit.”

Questions

1. What is the difference between discipline and a trial? How can you tell the two apart?
2. Have you experienced a trial and thought it was discipline, or discipline and thought it was a trial? Explain.
3. Provide three examples of discipline you personally experienced, and discuss whether it produced repentance and fruit.
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.

About the Author

Scott is the senior pastor of Woodland Christian Church in Woodland, Washington and a conference speaker. He and his wife, Katie, grew up together in northern California, and God has blessed them with seven children.



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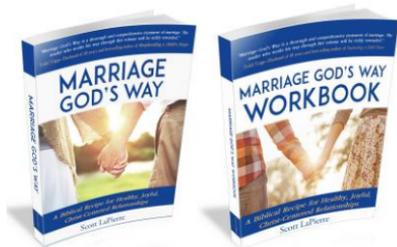
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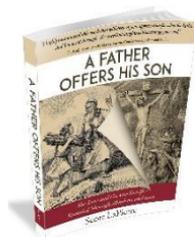


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